New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1950

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Bird Cage"

DAILY NEWS

February 23, 1950

Night Club Meller, 'The Bird Cage,' Has Lots of Scenery and Actors

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In 1945 Arthur Laurents wrote a drama, "Home of the Brave," which was a fine piece of work. Last evening at the Coronet Theatre Mr. Laurents was represented by "The Bird Cage," a night club melodrama which comes close, but not close enough, to being a present-day "Broadway." The 1945 job was much simpler and much more compelling.

The players of "The Bird Cage"—the name of the joint in which events occur—are very well chosen and have been realistically and intelligently directed by Harold Clurman. They include Melvyn Douglas, Maureen Stapleton, Eleanor Lynn, Sanford Meisner and Wright King. They all have their important scenes, and these scenes are individually exciting. But when all had been put together last evening I felt a regrettable disappointment in the result.

Hither and Thither Plot.

The drama follows the bit-of-this and bit-of-that technique which always is such a pleasant challenge to the scenic designer. For the scenario Boris Aronson has devised a two-level setting which includes the service bar of the night club, a dressing room, an office and stairs up and down which shapely babes can travel in their alluring attire. Once again lights go up and down, too, shifting attention as the actors and Mr. Laurents go through their lurid story of a heel.

The heel is Melvyn Douglas. On the surface a pleasant and generous employer, he is a louse inside. He double-crosses one partner, maims another, is cheap and stupid to his 17-year-old son, is utterly unfeeling toward a wife who is a drunkard with class, and tries to avail himself of any cutie working in the place.

The best of Mr. Laurents' scenes concerns the double-crossing of the partner, in which Mr. Meisner gives a fine, touching performance as the victim. Miss Lynn plays a well-stacked entertainer who won't give in to the boss and Miss Stapleton is very effective as the lonely, nice wife who has taken to secret nips.

Lots of Big Moments.

Certainly the play was intended to mount up and become a big thing, with gunplay, denunciations, rewards of virtue and the gaudy self-destruction of the heel. I just couldn't believe all of it—couldn't believe that Mr. Laurents cared much one way or another for any of his people, unless it was the poor, bemused chap played by Mr. Meisner. I thought he was just putting a scenario together and trying to make it zippy.

Mr. Douglas portrays the proprietor of the Bird Cage with great personal and physical force, but for all his skill he couldn't make me dislike him enough to relish his theatrically fancy finish. And some of the comic relief offered by sexily clad love-apples (as tomatoes once were called) did not paralyze me with laughter. Individual scenes are not a substitute for a play—and neither is revolving scenery.

"THE BIRD CAGE"

Play by Arthur Laurents; staged by Harold Clurman; setting by Boris Aronson; costumes by Ben Edwards; score by Alec Wilder; presented by Walter Fried and Lars Nordenson at the Coronet Theatre, February 22, 1950. The cast:

Frank.....Mike Kellin
Cork.....John Shellie
Eloise.....Kate Harkin
India Grey.....Eleanor Lynn
Ferdy.....Sanford Meisner
Mr. Ripley..Heywood Hale Broun
Pearl.....Jean Carson
Wally Williams..Melvyn Douglas
Vic.....Laurence Hugo
Emily Williams.....
Maureen Stapleton
Renie Renay.....Rita Duncan
Joe Williams.....Wright King
Mr. Mack.....Rudy Bond

Synopsis: The action of the play occurs in a metropolitan night club.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

February 23, 1950

'The Bird Cage' Opens—Wide; Douglas a Skillful Villain

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Bird Cage," last night's new entry, is the kind of play that seems always on the verge of making some big moral point. The characters are so single-minded, and the action so familiar, that you tell yourself there must be a deeper motive behind it all.

At one moment a heavily accented partner in the club starts to explain that in his old country people's faith would embrace the idea that his daughter's muteness was punishment for his sins. It is an interesting comment on the godless crew which burns up its evenings in the Bird Cage, but is not pursued.

In the end there is a suggestion of symbolism in the arson of the club, in plain sight, by the principal owner. The action would have meant more if any other character in the play had decided the Bird Cage must go.

This boss, who is the story's leading character, is the sort of man whose sole object is to demoralize and bully everyone who is in his life or who works for him. He breaks his pianist's hand, humiliates his wife into dipsomania, casts his shows by couch, and arranges to have his teen-age son seduce a female magician whose virtue he failed to storm himself.

Such behaviour, in this case, has a kind of melodramatic, though not very interesting, value.

Uncomfortably Noble Lines.

As he persists in destroying the other characters for crossing him, they insist on making elegant gestures, or singing out uncomfortably noble lines. When he goes particularly far to hurt his wife, she demands, "Brandy. For my heart. It's broken, you know."

The play is filled with lines like that, quite nice ideas, but inhuman ordinary conversation. Its balance between vulgarity and wit is embarrassing.

The play also has an awful lot of acting in it. Melvyn Douglas is starred as the contemptible club owner and does more than most actors of his ilk could with the role. Sanford Meisner is very much at home as his repentant partner, and Eleanor Lynn is comely and intent as the magician.

Maureen Stapleton has effective moments in the muzzy role of the wife, but Laurence Hugo and Wright King, as the pianist and the son, seemed the pleasantest and surely the most scrubbed looking members of the whole gang to have around.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
February 23, 1950

The Night Club and the World
By Richard Watts Jr.

Paraphrasing Shakespeare a bit, Arthur Laurents tells us that all the world's a night club. In his new play, "The Bird Cage," which opened at the Coronet Theatre last night, Mr. Laurents has written a vigorous, cluttered and rather exhausting melodrama about the troubles of a ruthless cabaret owner, but it is apparent that he has his mind on the larger issue of the fear and lust for power which he sees as dominating contemporary society. Despite some good performances, he hardly makes his point with proper effectiveness.

Let it be said on behalf of the man who wrote the promising and sensitive "Home of the Brave" that his latest work at least never commits the sin of being boring. By dint of providing enough plot for half a dozen dramas and not bothering too much about persuasiveness, he has seen to it that something is constantly going on and that the audience is never quite sure of what is likely to happen next. As a show, "The Bird Cage" undoubtedly has its virtues. But he obviously intended more than that.

Night Club as World

Even those who claim to be puzzled by "The Cocktail Party" should be able to see that Mr. Laurents intended his night club to be a kind of lurid microcosm of the world of men. As I have said, he feels that the ugly qualities of fear and the need for power are the driving forces of that world, with lust, cruelty, cupidity, deviousness and refuge in alcoholism as their dismal results. His central character must hold on to his club, the Bird Cage, at any cost in ruthlessness, because, as he says, it gives him a sense of being almost God.

To hold his ownership, he will descend to blackmail, the double crossing of his partner or any other crime that he sees as necessary, and his employes and even his family are dominated by the fear he inspires in them. And he, too, is motivated as much by terror as he is by his dreams of power, because he fears mortally that without power he will be nothing. Mr. Laurents' story is of his devious schemings to maintain his proprietorship and his final destruction, and a great deal of highly-colored activity goes with it.

The Melodrama

Things move with considerable intensity at the Bird Cage, and much of the melodrama is lively, colorful and interesting. But it is my impression that the narrative devised by the author is so artificially wrought that it never succeeds in being the pointed and ironic comment on life which he intended. And even as melodrama it has the grave fault of being so elaborately fabricated that it is, in the end, too artificial to have any genuine emotion or credibility about it. The staging, I suspect, adds to that feeling of excessive elaborateness.

The performances, however, are generally excellent. Melvyn Douglas is at the top of his form as the cabaret owner in a characterization of great force and conviction. There is a particularly fine portrayal of the owner's browbeaten and alcoholic wife by Maureen Stapleton, while Eleanor Lynn as a rebellious show girl, Sanford Meisner as the betrayed partner, Laurence Hugo, as another partner, Wright King as the proprietor's bullied son and Jean Carson as one of the girls are of much help. But "The Bird Cage" is chiefly sound and fury.

Journal American
February 23, 1950

Can Overlook Much But Not Its Dullness

By ROBERT GARLAND

Sorry, but Hollywood has happened to Arthur Laurents. Five years ago come Christmas, Mr. Laurents' "Home of the Brave" was presented by Lee Sabinson and William Katzell at the Belasco. Some of us professional first-nighters liked it, finding it "the best drama on World War II." Some of us didn't like it, finding it "earnest, yet vacillating, sophomoric and confused."

But none of us was inclined to lump it. Then along came "Heartsong." Exposed by Irene Selznick in Boston, it was urged to die right there. I am one who saw it. And I can assure you that Miss Selznick did herself and her dramatist a favor when, in the Ritz-Carlton bar, she decided not to bring the body to New York. For "Heartsong" was a play that anyone could lump. Most people did!

Now, at the Coronet, is "The Bird Cage." Sponsored by Walter Fried and Lars Nordenson against backgrounds by Boris Aronson, it, too, is a play that anyone can lump. And I do lump it, here and now. I can overlook its vulgarity and vice, its puerility and pretense. But, try as I may, I just can't manage to overlook its dullness . . .

It's as dull as Clifford Odets' "The Big Knife."

• • •

After Five Years

Which, in tone and attitude, it very much resembles. "The Bird Cage" also goes out of its way to show what Hollywood can do to a promising playwright, be he young, middle-aged or ancient. When, in 1945, "Home of the Brave" showed up on Broadway, it was, indeed, promising. So when, in Boston, "Heartsong" came into view, I dismissed it as old material unearthed.

"The Bird Cage," I fear, is no such dismissable thing. Instead, it's the best Arthur Laurents can do after five years of Hollywood has happened to him. It has to do with the a la 52d Street Manhattan night club which gives the piece its title. And the master of the joint, whose name is Wally Williams. And his wife. And his son. And his girl-friend. And his partner. And—

Wally is the motion-pictures' idea of a hard-boiled egg. But in three dimensions, he looks like a rat. A rat with no little mouse blood in him. So, while showgirls, bartenders, waiters and other night-clubbers talk rough like anything, a triangle develops into a square with Wally's son as the fourth unsavory corner. Not only is it dirty business. It is also business that is dull . . .

It is dull enough to be a moving-picture.

• • •

Star is Miscast

Melvyn Douglas is miscast and unbelievable as the owner of "The Bird Cage," the unfaithful husband of Emily, the corruptive father of Joe, the disloyal keeper of India, the double-crossing partner of Ferdy, the self-pitying bully of his employes and the ten-twent'-thirt' arsonist who burns his own beloved clip-joint. He sure does do his durndest to be a dastard!

In my unadmiring eyes, the best, and certainly the most believable, impersonation is that of Maureen Stapleton as Emily. In Miss Stapleton's honest acting hands, Wally's unhappy wife comes almost, but not quite, alive. Eleanor Lynn, as Wally's unhappy girl-friend, suggests Helen Morgan, although I don't know why. And so, with dullness, does "The Bird Cage" approach its end.

The others plod along with it to the best of their several and varying abilities. But their playwright, Arthur Laurents, gives them nothing worth while to plod along on. So, for the most part, they climb up and down Mr. Aronson's stairs and carry-on up in the air on a second story platform with a distracting up-and-downy elevator wall. And to wailful music by Alec Wilder . . .

Just about the bottom of "The Bird Cage," this poor play!

The New York Times
February 23, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Arthur Laurents, who once wrote "Home of the Brave," has now gone to considerable trouble to show that life in a night club is seamy and squalid. "The Bird Cage," which opened at the Coronet last evening, records in meticulous detail the moral depravity of a night-club king. Since Mr. Laurents is a professional craftsman, he arranges several good acting scenes in the second act. Melvyn Douglas, Eleanor Lynn, Sanford Meisner and Maureen Stapleton conspire with him to make the showy scenes effective.

But still an inquiring theatregoer is left with the impression that Mr. Laurents is not exactly breaking new ground. Despite the versatility of his craftsmanship, "The Bird Cage" is a formula job.

* * *

His hero is a tuxedo racketeer who has double-dealed himself into the proprietorship of a gilded bistro. Since he gives out the jobs, his entertainers, staff, partners and family stand in awe of him. His past is unsavory and is always on the point of catching up with him. To maintain his own security he frames one of his partners, breaks the fingers of his pianoplayer, contributes to the delinquency of his son, destroys his wife and finally wrecks the club, which is the only thing he has ever loved or taken pride in.

After the manner of a long line of backstage dramas, Mr. Laurents tells his melodramatic yarn against the gaudy trappings of a pleasure mart. The costumes, provided by Ben Edwards, are cheap and flashy, giving the customers a nice glimpse of legs and shoulders; and the talk is strictly in the vernacular.

* * *

Boris Aronson, flaneur at the midnight hot spots, has designed an alluring, dramatically lighted set on two levels that shows the house bar, a dressing room and the boss' office. And Harold Clurman, who recently directed "The Member of the Wedding," has kept Mr. Laurents' tale running briskly upstairs and down and flaring with bitter emotion.

Some good actors pitch into the squalor with a lot of skill and effectiveness. As the polished heel, Mr. Douglas is remarkably vigorous, resourceful and persuasive. Miss Lynn's high-spirited entertainer is plausible and likable. As the boss' broken-hearted wife, Miss Stapleton plays her big scene with warmth and candor; and Mr. Meisner, as one of the partners, plays his scene of hysterical renunciation with passionate desperation.

There are good performances also by Jean Carson as a friendly trollop, Laurence Hugo as a college graduate who is making a career of night-club entertainment, Heywood Hale Broun as a tipsy customer and Wright King as the boss' prep-school son.

Everyone has obligingly gone to a lot of trouble to make Mr. Laurents' sketch of the ugly side of night-club revelry work in terms of the tough-talking theatre. But his home of the heels is pretty hackneyed stuff. "The Bird Cage" is not such a fascinating joint as he apparently imagines.

New York Herald Tribune
February 23, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

Melodramatic Dice-Rolling

A TOUGH and strident melodrama of night club doings has come to the Coronet. "The Bird Cage," presented on two levels and in various cubicles, delves into the monomania of a bistro entrepreneur. Arthur Laurents, who will be remembered for "Home of the Brave," has written his new play with considerable eloquence and symoblism. It is performed in bravura fashion by Melvin Douglas and his supporting company. If it fails in the author's intent to make a cross-section of unhappy people reflect a sick world, it is still a striking piece of showmanship.

* * *

The script moves restlessly from blackmail to arson, with vivid patches of violence to keep the action engrossing. The proprietor of the Bird Cage breaks a pianist's finger, drives his socialite wife to drink, arranges a liaison for his son, destroys his bohunk partner and cites as the chief commandment, "do not get caught." He is obviously enmeshed in his own evil, but it is not very apparent just what motives force him to lose his particular place in the sun. Much of the work is more hysterical than communicative. The crafty staging by Harold Clurman and the settings by Boris Aronson are of more help to the proceedings than the writing.

* * *

Douglas is a tower of strength in the leading role. His portrayal is viciously inspired. Whether he is cunningly liquidating a partner who knows too much of the shady dealing which preceded his ownership of a cafe, humiliating a comely entertainer, or driving his own family against him, he gives the role the savage thrust which makes it emerge in somewhat terrifying terms. A self-appointed ruler of destiny, he is the archetype of contemporary villains. What is wanting in his characterization is some sympathy for a man who breaks all the rlues of decent existence in a vain attempt to make himself a boss man.

Sanford Meisner gives him splendid assistance as the partner with a deaf and dumb daughter, who refuses to continue in an abominable enterprise. He never fails to illuminate a turbid drama. Eleanor Lynn is excellent as a cabaret performer who values her self-respect more than a job and Laurence Hugo is equally fine as the pianist who takes refuge in alcohol. Then there are Maureen Stapleton, properly defeatd as the great man's wife; Jean Carson, as a scantily-clad photographer and John Shellie, in the part of a daft bartender. "The Bird Cage" has suspense and lurid theatrical excitement, but it does not add up to much of consequence in terms of allegory or meaning.

Daily Mirror
February 23, 1950

'Bird Cage' at Coronet Is Faltering Drama

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"The Bird Cage," which Walter Fried and Lars Nordenson brought to the Coronet Theatre last evening, represents an excellent cast staggering around in some exciting scenery, in search of a good melodrama. Though we are being repetitious, about the best we can say for Arthur Laurents in this instance is that he remains a young dramatist of promise.

"The Bird Cage" gets its title from a nightclub owned by three partners. The dominant boss is Wally Williams, a first-class heel. He and another partner, Ferdy, had gotten the dump by blackmailing its previous owner. The third and minor stockholder, Vic, is a maladjusted, would-be idealistic piano player.

In a couple of nights the unscrupulous Wally's dubious little world crashes down over his hard-boiled ears. He frames and kicks Ferdy out when Ferdy wants to sell the joint, because "the shnook" thinks their cumulative misdeeds are responsible for the plight of his deaf-and-dumb child. And he breaks Vic's hand.

As if that wasn't enough, his second wife, a dipsomaniac, turns on him, and a disillusioned son—for whom he claims he did it all—walks out, too. In a rage, Wally sets fire to the place. We suppose that he went down with his sinking ship.

Laurents probably started out with an interesting idea for a play and an arresting central character, but in performance they came over to us as second-rate melodrama and muddled characterization.

Melvyn Douglas as Wally and Sanford Meisner as Ferdy have a couple of genuinely moving scenes, which they play to the hilt, but too often during the evening their superior acting goes for naught. Others in the large company meriting salutes are Eleanor Lynn, Laurence Hugo, Jean Carson, Maureen Stapleton, John Shellie, Kate Harkin, Rita Duncan and Wright King.

The Boris Aronson sets are corkers. Alec Wilder's incidental music and Ben Edwards' costumes also are helpful. Harold Clurman's direction isn't of much assistance to a faltering script.

"The Bird Cage" lacks the invention, the novelty and zing of "Broadway," a predecessor in the nightclub play sweepstakes. It lacks the timing, the motivation and the heart of that classic of the Jazz Age. It probably reads better in script than it acts. It left us cold, even when it burst into flames at the end.

"The Devil's Disciple"

New York Post
HOME NEWS
January 26, 1950

Another Fine Shavian Evening

By Richard Watts Jr.

It is a sober and chastening thought to consider how much better this world might be if the statesmen and generals of history had been the men Bernard Shaw made of them. One of the greatest blessings of this increasingly interesting season in the theatre is that two of Mr. Shaw's most engaging idealizations of eminent military figures, the wise and tolerant Julius Caesar and now the witty, urbane General Burgoyne, are currently to be encountered on Broadway stages, delighting audiences and improving upon the merely factual past.

"The Devil's Disciple," the play in which Burgoyne figures, is not as important an item in the Shavian canon as the incomparable "Caesar and Cleopatra," but it is a completely beguiling melodramatic comedy and a thorough joy to behold. Offered by Maurice Evans and his fellow players at the City Center last night as the third production of the brief New York City Theatre Company season, it quite naturally provides by far the most enchanting evening they have yet given us, and an event sensible playgoers should not miss.

The Fun

It is wonderful fun to watch Shaw as he takes hold of all the old devices of sentimental melodrama, from the romantic reprobate who sacrifices himself for another to the last-minute rescue from the gallows, and turns them into a playful comedy packed with wisdom and wit. Puritanism, military stupidity, conventional vice and virtue, and romantic illusion are among the characteristic targets of the Shavian satire in this merry tale of the American Revolution, but the spirit, instead of being sharp, is the warmest and mellowest imaginable.

All of the play is delightful, but it is in the later sections of the comedy, when the author gets around to his court-martial scene, with the dashing Dick Dudgeon, the patriot, scoring over the fatuous British colonel to the intense satisfaction of the ironic General Burgoyne, that the fun reaches its height. The role of Burgoyne is not a long one, but every line he has is a treasure, and, while the American Dudgeon may be the hero, it is the English general who walks off with most of the honors, despite his military defeat.

The General

When the Theatre Guild produced "The Devil's Disciple" far too many years ago, Roland Young played Burgoyne with such wit and charm that no one who saw it will ever forget the experience. Since, however, there are only a few of us now alive who witnessed Mr. Young's triumph, Dennis King's portrayal of the role in the current production can be accepted upon its own terms, and it may be said that Mr. King manages the part very well. It is one of the most winning characterizations Shaw ever devised, and little of it is lost in the acting.

Mr. Evans, of course, is an excellent Dick Dudgeon, portraying the romantic rebel against King George, puritanism and sentimental illusion with humor and deftness. The lovely Marsha Hunt plays the somewhat bewildered heroine with sweetness and charm. Victor Jory is satisfactory as her husband, the patriotic minister, and Betty Lou Holland as the waif Essie, Ian Martin as a British sergeant and the rest of the cast offer pleasant performances. Did I hint that I liked "The Devil's Disciple"?

"THE DEVIL'S DISCIPLE"

Play by George Bernard Shaw; staged by Margaret Webster; settings by Peter Wolf; costumes by Emeline Roche; presented by the N. Y. City Theater Company at N. Y. City Center on January 25, 1950, under the supervision of Maurice Evans; presented by Richard Aldrich and Richard Myers in association with Julius Fleischmann at the Royale Theatre, February 21, 1950, with substantially the original cast:

Mrs. Dudgeon.....Hilda Vaughn
Essie.....Betty Lou Holland
Christie.....Logan Ramsey
Anthony Anderson..Victor Jory
Judith Anderson...Marsha Hunt
Lawyer Hawkins..Somer Alberg
William Dudgeon.....
O. Tolbert-Hewitt
Mrs. William..Cavada Humphrey
Titus Dudgeon...Robinson Stone
Mrs. Titus..Janet Maria Burtis
Dick Dudgeon...Maurice Evans
Sergeant.....Ian Martin
Major Swindon....Gavin Gordon
General Burgoyne..Dennis King
Brudenell.....Somer Alberg

Synopsis: Act I. Scene 1. The kitchen and general dwelling room of the Dudgeon farmhouse on the outskirts of a town in New Hampshire. Early morning. Scene 2. Minister Anderson's house that evening. The curtain will be lowered during this scene to denote the passage of time. Act II. Scene 1. A waiting room of the British Headquarters in the Town Hall next morning. Scene 2. The Council Chamber. Scene 3. The Market Place at noon. The action of the play takes place in Colonial America in 1777.

DAILY NEWS
January 26, 1950

'The Devil's Disciple' at the City Center Is a Sparkling New Play

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A play by GBS is like one of Jimmy Melton's vintage automobiles: just put it in running condition and it is as good as ever. Toots Shaw's "The Devil's Disciple" has been put in tiptop shape by the New York City Theatre Company, and it went skimming along at the City Center last evening, behaving so beautifully that you'd never dream it was an old 1897 job.

I'd buy it in a minute and I think you'll buy, too—and to blazes with modern gadgets. They just don't build plays the way they used to. What about newfangled streamlining, you say? Why, this sturdy old thing moves like a breeze; there isn't a wasted part in her, and she's better looking than most of the new crates you see parked along Broadway today.

I'm not the salesman, mind you—but I always like to see anybody get value for his money and would like to point out some of the elegant features. The dealer is the man in the box office at the City Center. But just take a look at this "The Devil's Disciple" for a minute.

Evans Welcomed Back.

There's Maurice Evans in the title role—as unprincipled and witty a Colonial rogue as ever stood his ground against the minions of George the Third. Mr. Evans twits Puritans and tweaks the noses of aristocracy with the utmost gaiety and assurance, and it is really heartening to see him in another Shaw comedy.

Then there is Dennis King as Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne, the very polite, unprofane and almost dainty Redcoat general who soon will have to surrender to the rebel Howe at Saratoga. The trial scene, in which Mr. King assists at the condemnation to hanging of Mr. Evans, is pure delight, for Mr. King is a splendid and sagacious comedian.

Needs Longer Run.

And all the rest of the parts of "The Devil's Disciple" are in fine working order. Marsha Hunt is quite enchanting as the wife of the minister whose place Mr. Evans has volunteered to take on the gallows—and Victor Jory is admirable as the minister. Hilda Vaughn gives an extraordinarily intense portrayal of an embittered Puritan mother. It is a thankless role, being so utterly dislikable, but Miss Vaughn is so good in it she should be thanked anyway.

Gavin Gordon makes a fine example of what Shaw thinks of the military mind in the role of the major who condemns Mr. Evans to hanging, and Logan Ramsey, Ian Martin, Betty Lou Holland and others of the company help make the play one of the best in town.

"The Devil's Disciple" is Shaw's wry glance at the American Revolution. As with all his historical works, it is based on conscientious historical research—but even when he states known facts he does it in such a jaunty disrespectful manner that you think the rascal made them up himself just for spite. This production has been staged by Margaret Webster, which is a guarantee of its sound quality. The Peter Wolf settings are simple but nicely pictorial.

The comedy is scheduled for only two weeks at the City Center and I think it would be a pity if it were forced to close in a fortnight. Some way should be found to keep it going, somewhere.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

January 26, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

A Rich Revival

ONE of George Bernard Shaw's seriously neglected plays, "The Devil's Disciple," has been given a rich revival at the City Center. Margaret Webster's production realizes the full impact of the author's sly and epigrammatic consideration of the American Revolution. Maurice Evans, who is supervising the current season at the Center, appears in the principal role of Dick Dudgeon with poise and conviction, and an excellent cast supports him expertly through "a play for puritans." Although the work is of the same vintage as "Caesar and Cleopatra," namely the '90s, it has lost none of its flavor.

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The distinguished nonagenarian was rarely in a more impish mood than he was when he imagined that a New Hampshire rebel pretended that he was an equally rebellious cleric and went to General Burgoyne's gallows with chin up. The theme gave G. B. S. a superlative opportunity for satire. He made the most of it those many years ago and Evans and his associates have made the most of it again. There is a rare enchantment in "The Devil's Disciple" which gives authority and reclame to the festival of low-priced shows on Fifty-fifth Street. Pithy and frequently sarcastic, the work has such ambiance and eloquence that one can only wonder why it has not been done here professionally since 1923.

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Evans is the mainstay of the production, playing the recalcitrant revolutionary with a superb blend of wit and Nathan Hale resolution. His amazement at finding that Burgoyne's soldiers will be on sounder ground if they hang him rather than fizzle a firing squad execution is matched by his ironic remarks about the fair sex and the inevitable mistakes of empire-building. Here is a Dudgeon which Shaw would most certainly care to see. The star plays down his role at all times, but this merely serves to make it the centrifugal force in a gay melodrama. Dennis King is fine as the general who was a realist before a strategist and Victor Jory gives a good account of himself as the minister who escapes the noose through Dudgeon's intervention and then saves the White Mountain rebel from a similar fate.

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There are good performances in every scene of "The Devil's Disciple." Marsha Hunt is attractive as the preacher's wife, who has more than a passing interest in Dudgeon. Hilda Vaughn contrives some wry moments of comedy as the New Hampshire matriarch who confounds her descendants in her will and Gavin Gordon takes the brunt of the Shavian ridicule of army doings with what can only be called restrained aplomb. The Peter Wolf settings do not quite fill up the vast expanse of the City Center's stage, but they are good backdrops for a capital revival.

The New York Times

January 26, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

There is only one thing wrong with the production of Bernard Shaw's "The Devil's Disciple," which was put on at the City Center last evening. It is scheduled for a run of only two weeks. Acted with great style by a lively company directed by Margaret Webster, it is the best of the current Center productions — braggadocio in a comic way and disdainfully witty in the last act. Why, this is excellent fooling, as Shaw's most illustrious predecessor said on another funny occasion.

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It is not so easy to be sure that "The Devil's Disciple" is the best comedy in town at the moment. For it would have to be compared with "Caesar and Cleopatra," which is its only current rival. Since "Caesar and Cleopatra" has some great principles of human conduct to promote it probably ranks a notch or two higher in the scale. But Mr. Shaw is the author of both comedies, and this is a point he can argue with himself, if it interests him. All that matters to us is that he is filling two theatres with laughter in the middle of a dismal season.

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From a technical point, "The Devil's Disciple" is a romantic play. After some of the most tedious dramatic exposition in the library, it plunges happily into flamboyant theatricals. Dick Dudgeon (a remarkably Gilbertian name, by the way) affronts the virtuous, protects the helpless, sacrifices himself gallantly for fair lady and behaves like the hero of a fatuous romance. The plot of "The Devil's Disciple" is as shameless as "Secret Service."

But the plot leads into a fantastically hilarious scene between, a perverse Yankee rebel and Gentleman Johnny Burgoyne, commander of His Majesty's forces in Colonial America in 1777. The courtroom occasion is solemn, but the author is Shaw—youthful, impious and infectiously humorous. The last half of "The Devil's Disciple" is a comic masterpiece.

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It is also very fat theatre. Most actors would be willing to pay a little to play the opposing parts in that scene. In view of the City Center's starved budget, that is just about what Maurice Evans and Dennis King are doing at present. As Dick Dudgeon, the devil's ingratiating disciple, Mr. Evans is a tower of strength throughout the performance. He gives a wide, roistering, humorous performance. As General Burgoyne, Mr. King is humorously insufferable. The sardonicism rolls off his lips with wonderful grace and condescension.

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The entire performance is a notable piece of work and brings us the services of some uncommonly able actors. As the local parson, Victor Jory is superb—romantically polite but with great relish of the humor. Marsha Hunt is admirable as the parson's confused but highly emotional wife.

Go straight through the cast, and you will find every actor giving a flick of distinction to every part—Hilda Vaughn as an acid-tongued shrew; Ian Martin as a punctilious sergeant with a dry sense of humor; Gavin Gordon as the sort of stuffy Britisher Shaw dotes on writing; Betty Lou Holland in the wispy part of a frightened orphan, and Logan Ramsey as the moon-struck chucklehead.

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Peter Wolf has designed some practical scenery in an amusingly impromptu style; and Emeline Roche has dressed the actors in vigorously sketched Colonial costumes and stunning uniforms. Miss Webster, in a droll mood, has made a good deal of the military pageantry that supplies a witty contrast to the wry grimaces of the dialogue.

Broadway, which pays high salaries, could not afford the skill, gusto and warm humor of the acting in this uproarious escapade through the history books. You would think that "The Devil's Disciple" had just been written by an impudent genius and that it had never been acted before.

Daily Mirror

January 26, 1950

'Devil's Disciple' Needs Some More Practice

By ROBERT COLEMAN

The New York City Theatre Company opened a revival of G. B. Shaw's "The Devil's Disciple" at the City Center last evening for an engagement of two weeks. The production is satisfactory, but nothing to provoke ringing of bells in the streets. It should improve as some of the stellar players master their roles more surely.

Margaret Webster's direction is not off her top shelf. The first-act pace seemed almost depressingly slow, and the actors have not been able throughout to key their performance to a single style. Their different methods of reading and projection are as far apart as the ripple on a fresh-water creek and a wave on the salty ocean.

Maurice Evans acts the title role robustly, but with few subtleties. His rich, ringing voice carries the iconoclastic defiance of the swaggering Dick Dudgeon to the highest reaches of the balcony, but often at the expense of shadings. Victor Jory acts the Reverend Anthony Anderson, who is converted by circumstances from a meek parson into an effective Revolutionary War leader, with restraint and a measure of stolidity.

The lovely Marsha Hunt contributes a rather pallid, soft-spoken and ineffectual portrait of Mrs. Anderson. Hilda Vaughn, as Dick Dudgeon's dour mother, is as stentorian as Evans. Ian Martin's Sergeant and Gavin Gordon's obtuse Major Swindon are good.

It is Dennis King, however, who provides the most rewarding performance of the evening as the mannered, sarcastic, gentlemanly General Burgoyne. His is graceful acting that catches beautifully all the irony and bite that Shaw wrote into the role. He sparked the second act into genuine theatrical excitement.

"The Devil's Disciple" is one of Shaw's best plays. In it, he satirizes the stupidity of British officialdom, which resulted in the American colonies demanding and winning their freedom. Here Shaw not only gives us some of his most witty and trenchant dialogue, but also is at his best in the delineation of character.

"The Devil's Disciple" is well worth seeing. It is a distinguished work in any season. It is an excellent buy at a $3.00 top. And you will doubtless see a better presentation of it than we did.